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Response to Mitsutoshi Takayanagi's 'Desire, Pleasure and Education: The Perfection of the Teacher through the Pursuit of Happiness'

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THE CONTEXT OF HAPPINESS IN EDUCATION

Recent months have seen a rise, both in academic and in policy discourse, of interest in the issue of happiness and wellbeing as they relate to education. John Field, whose writing reflects his concern with adult education, suggests that such a surge of interest may be related to our living in what he calls an 'affluent but highly risky society' (Field, 2009, p. 9). His work concluded that learning of itself has both direct and indirect effects on individual well-being and happiness. Arguably of greater significance is the move to thinking about the concepts of happiness and wellbeing in primary and secondary schools in England. This raises important questions about whether these concepts should be regarded as justifiable aims of education, and, following from this, whether they can be taught, learned or even assessed.

State schools of all kinds are now actively engaged with implementing strategies to address what are termed the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). These, a development of the social and emotional learning agenda that started in the United States, can be traced to research on aspects of emotional literacy or emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). To support such initiatives, there is a discernible rise in the availability of products and resources aimed at helping anxious parents—and educators—to develop and 'ensure' children's happiness.¹

Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (or PSHEE as it is often termed), is now being introduced as a curriculum requirement for all children in state schools from key stages 1-4.² The greater prominence of personal skills, now embedded within the curriculum, focuses on personal and economic wellbeing and financial capability. This reflects two recent, high profile, reviews of primary education. The Cambridge Primary Review proposes 12 aims for each child, the first being wellbeing, a term used, it seems, interchangeably with happiness. The review states: 'Happiness, a strong sense of self and a positive outlook on life are not only desirable in themselves: they are also conducive to engagement and learning' (Cambridge Primary Review, 2009, p. 30). In a similar vein, the government commissioned review of primary education (DCSF 2009) reported that a greater emphasis on children's social life skills, including emotional wellbeing and happiness, should be a compulsory part of the curriculum.

THE ARGUMENT PURSUED BY MITSUTOSHI TAKAYANAGI'S PAPER

Mitsutoshi Takayanagi's paper opens with 3 key statements drawn from Nel Noddings: first, that happiness should be an aim of education; second that schools should resemble the best homes, as happy places, and third, that if children are to be happy in schools, then their teachers should also be happy (Takayanagi, 2010). For Takayanagi, this raises a number of questions: what is happiness in education?; does one's own happiness mean suppressing the happiness of others?; what does a discussion of happiness contribute to the idea of what teachers are? In pursuing his argument, Takayanagi gives over the remainder of his paper to considering these questions in light of John Stewart Mill's Utilitarianism; Stanley Cavell's reading of Mill and his writing on Emersonian moral perfectionism.

Central to Takayanagi's argument is the point he reiterates about Cavell's reading of Mill: namely that he sees Mill not as offering a solution for promoting sublime pleasure, but rather as 'awakening us to the question of whether we are really pursuing our own happiness'. The reason why we may not be, Takayanagi argues, is that we are in some way 'deprived of desire', or 'blocked from desiring our desire'. This, he argues, is the same state described by Mill when he wrote: '[T]he mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of' (Mill, 1991, p. 68). It also reflects what Ralph Waldo Emerson termed our 'secret melancholy', or Henry David Thoreau called our 'leading lives of quiet desperation'.

In section IV of his paper, Takayanagi makes a significant move and interprets Mill's exposition of 'conformity' as an eloquent presentation of what he calls 'voicelessness'. This move may have been initiated by Mill's reference in the first line of the quotation to what he calls 'a hostile and dreaded censorship'. Recovery from this voicelessness is characterised by what Takayanagi terms our 're-engagement with desire' and by our re-affirmation to the society by means of, and in the process of, confirming and examining one's voice. Such recovery would be an escape from the 'boundless restrictions on one's action' which would enable individuals to be 'open to disagreement'.

Ideas of voicelessness and the recovery of voice are interests in my own writing which I have pursued in several ways. I have argued that the way in which students' academic writing is developed and assessed in an increasing number of universities in England leads to a form of voicelessness (Fulford, 2009). Similarly, one of my current interests is in the way that feedback is given to trainee teachers after their teaching has been observed and assessed by an experienced colleague.³ Drawing on my own experiences, and observations of this process, I conclude that the constraints on frank speaking that affect both the experienced teacher-observer, and the trainee, lead to a form of voicelessness that is borne of conformity with particular discourses and behaviours. In my writing, I argue, in a way not dissimilar to Takayanagi, that recovery of voice requires a re-engagement. I argue that this re-engagement is with one's language; one's self, and with one's community. Re-engagement with one's language, for example, is through the activation of what Thoreau calls the 'father tongue' (Thoreau, 1999, p. 93). It is the maturity of, and responsibility to, our words; to use Thoreau's image: it is to borrow the axe (language) and to return it sharper than when it was borrowed (p. 38).

According to the findings of the Cambridge Primary Review, engagement is one of the outcomes of pursuing happiness and wellbeing as educational aims:

[H]appiness on its own looks merely self-indulgent. But wellbeing goes much further than this ... Caring for children's wellbeing is about attending to their physical and emotional welfare. It is about inducting them into a life where they will be wholeheartedly engaged in kinds of worthwhile activities and relationships, defined generously rather than narrowly' (Cambridge Primary Review, 2009, p. 30).

In Takayanagi's paper, the nature of this re-engagement appears, as yet, undeveloped. Takayanagi proposes that re-engagement begins with an openness to disagreement, but it is not clear how this would be enacted in the classroom of an education system so driven by conformity and centralised control. How does a pupil, or a teacher, articulate disagreement, and with what do they disagree? Whilst openness to disagreement may be a precursor to speaking for oneself, for re-finding one's voice, how does this relate to happiness? Similarly, Takayanagi concludes that 'recovery is enabled by re-engagement with one's desire', but again, what is not fully clear is whether desire is correlated with happiness.

The main conclusion of the paper is articulated in the final sections, namely that: 'happiness in the classroom is not promoting what is called happiness in general'. This much is clear; happiness needs re-definition for the classroom; moreover, this is needed urgently to avoid what critics of the recent reviews of the primary curriculum have called the danger of the translation of happiness into 'some nebulous concept of emotional intelligence'.⁴ But if happiness comes through re-engagement, a re-engagement with what? With the work of the teacher and student? With moral thinking? With desire? With speaking one's mind? Only if these propositions are developed and pursued will the idea of who the teacher is become clearer. And this is an urgent task in the light of the curriculum imperative of happiness.

NOTES

- 1 See for example, the interactive resource from one US company that is offering an interactive programme entitled 'An Exercise in happiness' - <http://www.kidscandoanything.com>.
- 2 Key stages 1 – 4 cover children during their statutory education, i.e. from age 5 – 16 yrs.
- 3 'Flattery, Rhetoric or Parrhesia?: Conversations in Initial Teacher Education' Paper presented at the EERA Conference, Vienna, 28th-30th September 2009.
- 4 Taken from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) response to the independent review of the primary curriculum.

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